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Broken Promises in a '*Promised Land*': Race and Citizenship after 9/11 in Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*

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Abstract: This paper examines the racialisation and gendering of a collective subject described as 'Middle Eastern or Muslim' in the US post-9/11. It examines how this category came to be visible and prominent through the workings of disciplinary powers and the politics of security and freedom. Analyzing the text *Once in a Promised Land,* the paper will show how Jassim and Salwa inspite of relinquishing all forms of transnational political engagement and building their image in implicit compliance with the assimilative criteria that guarantee the good Arab-American label were victims of suspicion and downright racism. So the paper will explore how the novel goes beyond representing the consequences on Arabs in the post-9/11 America, and skillfully investigates the psychological, social, political and economic dimensions of the experiences of Arab Americans by questioning the concept of citizenship. How this text by imagining counter-hegemonic and heterogenous enactments of non-formulaic, non-binaristic types of US citizenship challenges homogenized depictions of Muslim Americans and forging in the process revisionary spaces that stand against and redefine exclusionary conceptualizations of US citizenship will also be explored. The centrality of race, class and religion to such forms of citizenship suggest that we need to rethink multiculturalism in relation to governmentality as a process of modern subject formation as well as to the state practices that use such subjects and contribute to their formation. So it will be analyzed how multiculturalism has become in the US post-9/11 as a state project to create racialised and gendered subjects who see themselves as American at some points and as different kind of Americans at other times and places.

Key words: 9/11, Citizenship, Muslim, Race.

Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* is the first attempt by an Arab American novelist to represent the repercussions of 9/11 on Arab Americans. The novel goes beyond representing the consequences on Arabs in the post 9/11 and, skillfully investigates the psychological, social, political and economic dimensions of the experiences of Arab Americans by questioning the concept of citizenship. It explores the intersections of class, gender and other socio-political factors with the post 9/11 epoch. The novel highlights and invites us to examine the consequences of the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses on the characters, mainly Jassim and Salwa and contributes to the ongoing debate on the components/features/limitations of Arab American identity.

Jassim and Salwa Haddad, the protagonists of *Once in a Promised Land*, are a well-to-do Muslim Arab American couple living in Tucson, Arizona. They are not quite at home in either their Jordanian or American contexts, for they struggle to find a place for themselves and remain confused and stymied by their mixed identities. Salwa herself was born in the US while her parents tried their hand, unsuccessfully, at achieving the American dream. Back in Jordan she meets Jassim at her university in Amman, where he is visiting from the US and giving a guest lecture on the role of water in the regional politics of the Arab world. She consequently jilts her boyfriend, Hassan and marries Jassim, "who promised her America" (37). They settled in Tucson, Arizona where their lucrative jobs postpone any permanent return to Jordan, because they live their comfortably with fancy cars and more space and privacy than they ever had in Jordan. As Halaby says, "America, once tasted, is hard to spit out… Jordan pumps through the blood, but America stays in the mouth" (64). Jassim's thriving carrier as a hydrologist for the Tucson water company, and Salwa's job as a banker and real estate broker provide them with the material luxuries that seemingly assert their attainment of the American dream.

But appearances prove to be unreliable, for happiness remains elusive in their "predictable, well-ordered American life" (Vinson, Paragraph 6). This happiness becomes permanently out of reach when their lives take a sharp turn for the worse after a series of escalating events leave them physically and spiritually broken and estranged from each other. Unfulfilled in spite of the comforts and luxuries of their American life, they lie to each other and so exacerbate their alienation from one another. The disintegration of Jassim's and Salwa's lives is accelerated by the fallout of the September 11th attacks. Their Arab, Muslim background seems to automatically render them suspect in the eyes of people around them. As they

increasingly become the objects of distrust, fear and bigotry, the couple is forced to confront the futility of their material successes and the hollowness at the heart of their American dream. After 9/11, both Jassim and Salwa come under personal scrutiny by citizens galvanized by Bush's call to act as the eyes and ears of the government – or what Judith Butler would call "petty sovereigns" (56) – a responsibility initially reserved for members of bureaucratic institutions but now extended to the entire nation. They are branded as outcasts and foreigners because of their ethnic origin.

The novel opens shortly before the deadly event of 9/11. Jassim practices his daily routine of swimming at dawn before he goes to work for a company that helps manage the city's water supply. Against Jassim's wishes, Salwa stops taking her contraceptives. She gets pregnant quickly but does not have the courage to tell her husband. Suddenly, she miscarries. Her miscarriage creates a gap between her and her husband. This gap is further widened by the "patriotic breathing of those around them" and by what Salwa in particular comes to resent as "those red, white, and blue fingers flapping at her, flicking her away" (184-85). Jassim continues his life, presumably unconcerned by the clear consequences of the events of post 9/11 on Arab Americans. He refuses to accept that the attitude of people around him have changed since 9/11. On the other hand Salwa becomes more and more irritated by the loss of her baby and the prevalent patriotism that pushes her to the margins and renders her outside the nation's borders.

As a result, Salwa begins to question the nature of her existence in the US. She says, "*We cannot live here anymore…it is different now*" (54). It is within this hostile atmosphere that Jake, a young (white) American part time banker and drug dealer approaches Salwa. Jake is interested in Salwa because she looks exotic. Though everyone says that Jake is an odd person, Salwa remains blinded by her own nostalgia for home and her sense of loss and loneliness. Jake has sex with Salwa and boasts to his colleagues about his sexual conquests, though he does not name the woman he seduces. Salwa also benefits and willingly participates in the affair. When Salwa informs Jake that she has decided to return to Jordan, she discovers Jake's manipulative nature. High on drugs, Jake physically assaults Salwa.

Jassim, on the other hand, seems absorbed by the consequences of a road accident he has become involved in a few months after 9/11 that leads to the death of a teenager from an impoverished family. The inscriptions (Terrorist Hunting License) on the teenager's skateboard shows that the boy had harbored anti-Arab sentiments. Though the police declare Jassim innocent, the accident turns out to be a decisive point in Jassim's life. Heavily burdened by the accident, Jassim becomes obsessed with the world of the boy he has killed. He frequents lower class (white) American neighborhoods. He befriends Penny, a waitress at a café, who gives him the key to explore an unknown American world. Meanwhile, a secretary from the same company where Jassim works, reports against him to the FBI as "a suspicious rich Arab with access to the city's water supply" (271). Jassim ultimately loses his job as he becomes the focus of an unjustified FBI investigation. Jassim's last few words to Penny, that he cannot stay in the country anymore because no one will employ him, encapsulate the dilemma of an upper-middle class professional deluded by the American Dream that mistakenly leads him to assume that he belongs in the US.

Thus the point Halaby makes is that after September 11, Arab Americans have fallen one step behind other social outsiders, being branded not only as outsiders but also as 'enemy within' – "Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us" (56) and whose goals must be foiled at any price.

Halaby's novel is a story about what it is like to be Arab in America after the devastating attacks of 9/11. It is also a moving tale of lost hope and stunted potential. This sense of shattered dreams and aching beauty is superbly captured in the cover design of the book. The cover depicts a swimmer shooting across shimmering blue water. His image is mirrored by the shadow of an airplane that hovers above. These images superbly capture the ways in which the 9/11 attacks, suggested by the shadow of the looming airplane, haunt the lives of the Arab characters, whose aspirations and ambitions are reflected through the cool brilliance of the water.

Halaby also prefaces *Once in a Promised Land* with the statement, "Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything" (viii), and the novel gradually reveals that the truth lies somewhere between these extremes. Certainly the attacks have a powerful impact on the couple's lives. 'Nothing and Everything' highlights the precarious position Arabs occupy in US racial hierarchies. Arabs are portrayed as a homogenous group with propensities for criminal conduct. Similarly in the preface the wording "the afterlife promise, the gardens beneath which rivers flow" (VII) taken from Quran, is a subtle nod to post 9/11 when American media talked about and made fun of the promise of virgins in heaven. In reality there is very little about virgins in the Quran and more language like the quote used in the preface.

In spite of relinquishing all forms of transnational political engagement and building their image in implicit compliance with the assimilative criteria that guarantee the good Arab American label, both Jassim and Salwa were victims of suspicion and downright racism. Salwa

is verbally assaulted by a bank client, "a native Tucsonan, American born and raised", who prefers to discuss her bank account with someone she can "understand better" (114). Similarly, a teenage salesgirl at the local mall calls security guard on Jassim because "he just stood there and stared for a really long time, like he was high or something" (30). When Salwa asked her why she called security on her husband, she replied: "He just scared me" (30). Because their appearances invites mistrust, a friend of Salwa's offers them both American flag decals to announce their patriotic inclinations to any American rattled by the terrorist attacks to attempt an act of vengeance (57).

In this general atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust, Jassim arrives at his local gym for his daily swim, "a morning ritual as close to prayer as he could allow" (3), only to have the receptionist inform him that "someone pooped in the pool" (101). Although Jassim at this point hasn't yet attracted the attention of federal authorities, the contamination of the pool seems related to his suspicious presence at the gym, where he is under constant surveillance by a former US marine (with a personal grudge against Jordanians) who seeks to make himself useful to his country again through hyper-vigilance and racial profiling (173). In fact, as one among several features of the war on terror, criminal justice scholar Michael Welch invokes "the need for purification that goes beyond ridding the world of terrorists deemed not only dangerous but also morally tainted" (42). So although Jassim himself is not responsible for the defilement of the pool, symbolically the stigma attached to that defilement also applies to him.

Nadine Naber describes the attacks of 9/11 as 'a turning point' rather than 'the starting point' of histories of anti-Arab racism in the US (4). Naber argues that since 9/11, Arabs and Muslim Americans have been lumped together into a new racialized category that obscures the considerable diversity that exists within these populations. Newspapers, films and TV shows are powerful tools for disseminating the racializing of Arabs and Muslim Americans and forming public opinions. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Penny, a working class white American woman, has "become obsessed by it [the television] ever since the Twin Towers had been destroyed" (280). Discussing with her flatmate what the US government should do in the Middle East, Penny relies on images transmitted on the TV to articulate her ideas about Jassim:

> Penny continued staring at the television. 'The one has nothing to do with the other. And he's from Jordon, not from Afghanistan. Jassim is a good guy – he's not like them, shouldn't be judged like them. But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other. They 're the ones who should be bombed' (281).

Through Penny, the novel seems to reveal the blindness that comes with patriotism and the consequences of a particular brand of propaganda. Though living in poverty herself, Penny nevertheless identifies with the nation through her unwavering belief in the government's policy to wipe out terrorists hideouts outside the US. Penny's nationalist response to the President's speeches on American values of freedom and democracy is part and parcel of a long process of demarcating the borders of the nation through demonizing others:

> If she had money she would have sent it to him [The US President]; if she had been younger, she would have enlisted, showed all those terrorists what Americans were made of, how they were continuing the great history of their country, getting out there and saving poor people from the oppression of living in their backward countries. (280)

She felt an unspeakable pride when she heard the President saying about "all the American men and women who served for freedom, freedom all around the world" (280). Penny's response is fully loaded with the ideology of American empire that assigns America a messianic role in the world, that regards America as the great guardian and beneficiary of mankind. Cainker explains that the racialization of Arabs is tied to larger US global politics. The domestic aspect of this project is in the manufacturing of public consent which is needed to support, fund and defend these policies (49). The mapping of cultural racism onto nation-based racism, Naber explains, has been critical in generating support for the idea that going to war 'over there' and enacting racism and immigrant exclusion 'over here' are essential project of protecting national security (280-81).

Penny has fully subscribed to the argument that the US is waging a war 'there' because the terrorists have attacked us 'here' and she feels proud of being American since this entails that she is a free and morally superior person. Similarly, when Jassim is fired from his job, Marcus, Jassim's boss, seems to use the logic that "racism is wrong but essential" (Alsultany 208):

> 'Bottom line, we are going to lose the business if I don't make an act of good faith to the people we do business with' 'And firing me is your act of good faith.' 'Yes'. Though he didn't like the way that sounded. (297)

Nadine Naber believes that official federal government policies such as special registration,

detentions, and deportations have fostered this approach by constituting particular subjects as potential enemies within the nation. Although Naber argues that these potential enemies are specifically working-class non-resident Muslim immigrant men from Muslim-majority countries, the novel shows that upper and middle class professionals are not above suspicion.

Leti Volpp argues that 9/11 facilitated the consolidation of a new identity category that grouped together persons who appear to be 'Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim'. What has solidified this identity category is a particular racialization, wherein members of this group have been identified as terrorists, and disidentified as citizens (147). In the American imagination, those who appear to be 'Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim' may be theoretically entitled to formal rights, but they do not stand in for or represent the nation. Instead, they are interpellated as antithetical to the citizen's sense of identity. Citizenship in the form of legal status does not guarantee that they will be constitutive of the American body politic. In fact quite the opposite: "the consolidation of American identity takes place against them" (157).

Jassim's apoliticism, which enables him to participate for some time in the fiction of the American dream, in fact renders him oblivious to the associations pegged onto his male, Muslim, Arab (and hence "suspect") status in a post 9/11 America. Further his upper middle class status – gained by his white-collar job and his unwavering belief in American dream – makes him turn blind eye to the potential deadly consequences of 9/11. Jassim initially tries to delude himself by ignoring the harassment directed at him at work and in public spaces. He convinces himself that this has nothing to do with his ethnic origin (partly because he does not reflect on the significance of ethnic origin). For instance, while wondering about the office staff's strange behavior toward him, he quickly dispels the notion that they might in any way be drawing a direct line between him and the hijackers. He tells himself and tries to believe, "He had little connection to those men as they [the office staff] did, and there was no way he could accept that anyone would be able to believe him capable of sharing in their extremist philosophy" (23). At one point, Salwa tells Jassim about a call that she heard on the radio to round up Arabs in the US (in a fashion reminiscent of the infamous WWII internment of the Japanese). Dismissing Salwa's words as hocus pocus, Jassim coolly changes the subject and turns to an article on recycling refuse. He admires the Japanese for their technological advancement:

> 'The Japanese are incredible. Did you know that they have thirty four different categories of recycleables? Only twenty percent of their trash goes to landfill, whereas eighty percent of American waste does'. (58)

Ironically, the first words he mutters are: 'The Japanese are incredible'. That Jassim admires the Japanese for their technological advances but fails to relate to the horrible experience they had in the US during World War II, indicates that the scientist in Jassim, absorbed as he is in work, cannot make any connection with the Japanese on the basis of similar plight triggered by ethnic origin. Similarly, when Salwa tells him that their Lebanese American friend Randa is worried about her children's safety after the attacks, he deems such worries unreasonable and extreme.

When Jassim feels that he is being harassed, he turns his attention to other white people for support. Jassim moves down the social hierarchy but remains affiliated with a white social group. It does not occur to him to make connections with other ethnic groups. His relationship with Penny can be understood within the context of the precarious position Arabs occupy within US ethnic and racial discourses. Seen from this angle, Jassim's identity remains defined within a white social context, though economically less privileged. Penny sympathizes with Jassim precisely because he is now a marginalized other, a fact that Jassim continually tries to deny. When she asks him "[d]o people give you a hard time these days?", Jassim stoically contends: "No, not so much" (156). When he and Penny came across a working class Jordanian couple at Wal-Mart, Jassim hesitates in talking to them. Ironically, it is Penny who mouths a few words of sympathy for the woman in hijab, '"I bet people give her a lot of grief these days"'(279). Jassim pretends not to have heard her comment. Jassim's blindness to the plight of fellow Arabs from lower classes indicates that he still locates his identity in a white context and obstinately refuses to align with the people of color from lower classes.

But Jassim's decision to work with humanistic zeal in the US slowly starts waning and is eventually replaced by a complacent outlook that leaves Jassim feeling that he has been "eaten by the West" and by "the easy American life" (278), for "he had walked away from the life he had planned," (219) a life entrenched in the political role of water in the Middle East. The accusations hurled at him and many other Arabs and Muslims in the US after 9/11, compounded by the fact that had accidentally killed a boy in a car accident, reveal to Jassim his delusional and false sense of belonging in the US:

> It had taken killing a boy for his soul to awaken,…he saw that the past nine years (and even more than that) had been a sabbatical from real life, a rich man's escape from the real world (218)….In more than a decade of

> good citizenship, he had never for a minute imagined that his successes would be crossed out by a government censor's permanent marker, that his mission would be absorbed by his nationality, or that Homeland Security would have anything to do with him. Things like this aren't supposed to happen in America. (299)

Furthermore, an eye-opening realization dawns upon Jassim when he undergoes an interrogation by two FBI agents who blow things out of proportion and create scenarios whose only merit is the unequivocal attribution of guilt. Jassim falls into the FBI trap, because he is flagged by one of his office secretaries playing the role of the hyper vigilant 'citizen patriot'. Before meeting with Jassim, the FBI agents first visit his boss Marcus. Their questions to Marcus about Jassim's 'reaction to the war in Afghanistan,' his opinion 'about Jordan's leadership,' as well as his political activities outside the office affirm the recurring confluence among political dissent, Muslim identity, and terrorism in national security (as well as public) rhetoric after 9/11. Marcus assures the FBI agents that Jassim is as "apolitical and unreligious a person as I know" (224), thus conforming his employee's stout adherence to the good Arab American category.

Jassim's interrogation by these two FBI agents takes place in a restaurant, a tightly circumscribed yet public space. The conversation is dominated by the white FBI couple confronting a racially and sexually ambiguous figure who is simultaneously a possible terrorist and an ordinary traffic delinquent. The ritual of interrogation is thus acted out with a subject who must both behave normally and effectively defend himself. By imposing a 'plot' on Jassim's 'story' – teeming with random accidents and unlikely coincidences – the FBI, to use Banita's words, "effectively reverses the normality/deviance opposition, seeing causality in inexplicable events and failing to find an explanation for occurrences that Jassim considers logical and related" (248). "The FBI is trying to get information on every Arab in the country right now. Our government is at a loss, so they are grasping at straws. Jassim is a straw" (269), Jassim's employer observes with what strongly resembles common sense. His ability to view the situation so reasonably does not prevent him, however, from firing the Arab scientist and feeling that he has received confirmation of his suspicion when an article entitled "Engineering Mistakes in the Building of the Twin Towers" (298), of the kind millions of Americans would have read after the attacks, is found on Jassim's desk. Seeing that the suspicion evoked by Jassim in his clients and his neglect of his duties as a result of personal troubles would greatly endanger the position and profitability of his business, Marcus terminates Jassim from his job despite his excellent record with the firm.

Louise Cainker argues that the ways in which Arabs, Muslims, and people perceived to be Arabs and Muslims were held collectively responsible after the 9/11 attacks "should provide the convincing evidence that their racial denouement had been sufficiently sealed before the attacks occurred" (47). Cainker asserts that the violent act of any Arab or Muslim is rendered to represent entire societies and cultures and is portrayed as a mechanical, civilizational act. The questions that the FBI ask Jassim renders him as the 'enemy within'. They, for instance, ask him, "What was your reaction to the events of September 11?... How often do you pray in a mosque?...*Did you ever meet any of the hijackers personally*? etc. In response, Jassim objects to the FBI accusations, pleading that being an Arab does not mean being a terrorist:

> 'I swim, I work, I go home. Not unlike the rest of America, I suspect.'…I am a scientist. I work to make water safe and available. I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab. Yes, I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no desire to abuse it. The mere fact that I am an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter…. Just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil. (232)

The FBI agents ignore Jassim's words of protest because they do not consider him as an individual of free will, but as a part of a collective racialized self. Cainker states that the collective backlash after 9/11 can be viewed as an act of defining the boundaries of whiteness and argues that the imposition of collective guilt on Arabs and Muslims through public policies and popular actions is an outcome rather than beginning of their racialization (52). The discourses of security risk and assumptions about the innate characteristics of persons perceived to be Arabs and Muslims are institutionalized through homeland security and war on terror policies. Policies implemented by the US government after 9/11 include: detention, deportation and special registration.

Jack Franks, a retired army officer with a troubled past, decides to keep an eye on Jassim and ultimately reports his movements to the FBI. Discourses of patriotism, othering and racialization all overlap in Jack's decision:

> *These are some scary times we live in,* he reasoned to himself. *My number-one duty is*

> *to help protect my country. The president said that specifically, that it is our job to be on the alert for suspicious behavior, to help the police, to be the eyes and ears of the community. Besides, if it turns out to be nothing, then no harm done to anyone. Dammit, if you're going to live in this country, you're going to have to abide by the rules here.*
>
> Jack had no need to see beyond the act of what he was doing. For the first time in years he felt armed with a righteous and vital responsibility and therefore important, selfless. (173)

Jack, to use Banita's words, is a "citizen galvanized by Bush's call to act as the eyes and ears of the government" (246). While jack senses the incongruity of this situation, he feels comfortable enough to report Jassim to the FBI because the US government, represented by the US president, has endowed him with the power to protect his country from foreigners and terrorists.

As a result of his unjust marginalization, Jassim begins to regard his surroundings with renewed candor and interest. Suddenly feeling "like a ghost who might vanish at any time without being noticed…a visitor to this country, to this woman, to this life" (153), Jassim perceives the world from an increasingly detached perspective, one that grants him insight into aspects of American life to which he had previously given little thought. If prior to the terrorist attacks he could live his American life "bulldozer style, an Arab in a Mercedes, oblivious of the sizzling around him, the words tossed his way, the puddles of fear and loathing he skirted and stepped through," after September 11, "his diorama shaken, he began to see, slowed down, and looked at those looking back. And for the first time he felt unsettled in his beloved America". Now he "vaguely longed for home, where he could nestle in the safe, predictable bosom of other Arabs" (165). The massacre of thousands of Americans in the Twin Towers and the Pentagon not only peeled "the safety film from people's eyeballs, allowing in what is really there rather than the filtered view through the comfort of routine" (217), but encouraged Jassim to return the fearful, loathing gaze of anti-Arab racism and respond not necessarily in kind but in the same style: in looking at himself through a hate-tinted lens, he internalizes the racist profiling to which he is outwardly subjected. Like Changez he begins to neglect his duties, his work standard slows down and his so far balanced and empathetic vision of America suddenly degenerates into a damning view that diagnoses a social apartheid with "unwelcoming American neighbors which clearly blamed him personally for recent suffering" on one side and "more liberal streets where fear and hatred were disguised" (201) on the other.

Salwa's gender and social class among other social realities set her apart from Jassim. As a daughter of the working class Palestinian-Jordanian parents, a sense of displacement marks her life right from the beginning. While she gets married to Jassim and pursues her American Dream in her own way, Salwa is attentive to the changes brought about by 9/11 on herself and other Arabs on different levels. Instead of absorbing herself in her work in order to cope with the post 9/11 hostilities, Salwa avidly but aimlessly, tries to open Jassim's eyes to the dangers surrounding them. Salwa is more alert than Jassim to the fragility of her citizenship and is aware that citizenship for an Arab in America is not a guarantee against harassment and racist assaults. Salwa realizes that she does not represent the US nation and her citizenship can be stripped away from her easily. Her relationship with Jassim begins to crumble when the two hold different views on the latest events. Salwa thinks that the post 9/11 war on terror is a justification to invade the Middle East and control its riches, but Jassim's lack of interest in her views deepens the rift that originated from Jassim's refusal to have children. Salwa turns to Jake to fill the void.

Salwa's miscarriage, estrangement from her husband, her nostalgia for her mother and sisters and the exclusionary nationalist discourses in the US post 9/11 converge to disrupt her ongoing Americanization process and to highlight her non-mainstream status. Salwa's angry response to the white woman who refuses to work with her at the bank once she discovers that Salwa is an Arab, underscores Salwa's refusal to be pushed to the margins of the nation. Rendered as racialized other, Salwa contemptuously and angrily asks the woman: "Would you like to work with a Mexican man or an American lesbian?" (114). Instead of exposing the inherent racism in the white woman's deed, Salwa derogatively drags other marginalized groups into the picture. As Muneer Ahmad in "Homeland Insecurities" insists that immigrants are made American when they are racialized as subordinate. Ahmad explains:

> We might think of the resulting racial hierarchy as a citizenship exchange market in which the relative belonging of any one racial or ethnic community fluctuates with prevailing social and political pressures. What is more, communities of color learn the *imperative* of subordination of others. (106)

In competing for Americanization, Salwa first dissociates herself from other minorities and then subordinate them. Salwa's response reveals a

tension that continues to characterize Arab relations with other ethnic groups. Through Salwa's angry reaction, the novel demonstrates, to borrow Banita's words, "that after September 11, Arab Americans have fallen one step behind other social outsiders, being branded not only as second-rate citizens but also as social hazards" (246).

Seen from this perspective, Salwa's angry response to the woman's racist comments is then an attempt to defy an unexpected social downgrading. Just as her husband imagines that his white collar job secures his white status, Salwa is not too different. The white woman's comment shocks Salwa because Salwa perceives herself as part of the mainstream. Salwa is doubly flabbergasted here because she is being racialized at the very place which provide her with the means to penetrate and subdue whiteness. When Joan, Salwa's boss at the real estate office, hands Salwa the US flags to put on her car, Salwa feels that she has been pushed to the margins. She realizes that mainstream Americans do not consider her part of them; rather they perceive her as a racialized other:

> At first she had thought it was a result of language, or of her being from a different culture, but now, all these years later, she was beginning to think it was simply the culture of America to show everything but to remain an island, a closed-up individual. In the past month that distance had been stronger, an aftereffect of what had happened in New York and Washington, like the cars sprouting American flags from their windows, antennas to God, electric fences willing her to leave. (54)

Salwa feels abandoned because she is no longer part of the mainstream. She is seen by (white) Americans as a foreigner. Salwa identifies the post 9/11 anti-Arab prejudice as a major force of change in her life:

> If wishes come true, she would wish that things were now as they once had been, but Salwa knew in the marrow of her bones that wishes don't come true for Arabs in America, recognized that the shift had come just months before, on the very day when she had tried with all her soul to drown her deception. It was not just her Lie that had brought her distance between her and her husband and surrounded them with tension, it was the patriotic breathing of those around them. American flags waving, pale hands willing them to go home or agree. (184-85)

The influence of the post 9/11 hostilities is felt by Salwa only as much as they distance her from the mainstream. In other words, the backlash disrupts Salwa's gradual admittance into whiteness originally facilitated by virtue of her upper-middle class status.

The only American who is affectionate towards Salwa is Joan, who treats Salwa "like a daughter" (205) of her own. At one occasion she asks Salwa, "Is something bothering you?" (204) just to confirm that everything is ok with Salwa, because to her Salwa seems preoccupied. Salwa, just to hide the reality, replies, I am comfortable here and there is nothing to worry. "Thank you, Joan. You have been so kind to me, and I really appreciate it" (205). Indeed at the heart of Salwa's engagement with whiteness is her attempt to create parallels between the US and her country of origin in a way that transforms the very American concepts, people and cultural tokens to a version that accommodates her as a white American citizen:

> Not for the first time Salwa wondered why Joan, who was so very American and patriotic, reminded her of someone from home. Not anyone in particular, just as someone whose warm nosiness forced its way into your heart, whether or not you liked the person or agreed with her politics. (205)

Salwa merrily associates Joan with home in spite of the latter's strong American patriotism because, unlike Petra, Joan represents sexual normativity. In other words, Joan is part of the mainstream to which Salwa wants to belong. This is in sharp contrast to Salwa's relationship with Petra, the white lesbian at the bank. Salwa dissociates herself from Petra because Petra is sexually marginalized. When Petra tells Salwa that Molly, Petra's partner, was moving out with a man, Salwa is perplexed: '"It must be awful". Really, how awful, and how odd to feel such sympathy and disgust all in one moment'. She seems intensely disliking "this culture, where men and women could choose between men and women, where there were no limits, no taboos" (183). Salwa thinks that she is part of the mainstream. Indeed, she refuses to be part of a stigmatized and a marginalized group. She identifies with a white heterosexual woman, but does not identify with a white lesbian. Similarly Salwa's relationship with Jake is an unconscious attempt on her part to prove her Americaness through adopting perceived 'American' codes of behavior. Her attraction to Jake is an attempt to cling to (white) American normativity and the mainstream:

> Against all that she knew to be right in the world, and well aware that as *friends* was one of those lines Americans tossed back and forth without meaning, she entered his [Jake's] apartment and stood, awkward, out of place. Visitor parking. She looked around. A black leather couch faced an enormous television….Jazz tingled quietly out of giant speakers. (what was it about Americans and speakers and music?) The tidy living room faced a massive pine tree outside, and on the other side a narrow hallway stretched, she guessed, to the bathroom and bedroom. The small dinning table was set with candles and one pink rose, none of which Salwa had expected. (207)

The text equates Jake with Americaness. In fact, Jake's parents are US diplomats. In other words, he does not represent America on the personal level, but certainly on the official level. He represents an all-American lineage. Jakes behavior, physical appearances and life style are often described as American. For instance, when Salwa enters Jake's apartment, she is astounded by the giant speakers. When he offers her a drink, she asks herself '"*What was the American obsession with ice cubes*?"' (208). After Jake kisses her at lunch time, Salwa tried hard to explain this incident in an American context: '"Salwa tried to focus, to put her entire being into her work. That was the American way, after all, wasn't it?"' (189). In spite of being a drug addict, Jake belongs to the mainstream and thus provided a life line to Salwa to salvage her mainstream status. As Amaney Jamal argues, in post 9/11 era some Arab Americans have felt that "the white label has remained the one label that can protect them from losing the semblance of 'American' status" (320). Jamal maintains:

> If we look at the history of Arab American integration in the United States, it is rife with accounts of Arab Americans asserting their whiteness not only in relation to economic mobility and integration but also in relation to all things 'American'. In other words 'white' and 'American' are often experienced interchangeably. (320)

Like Jassim, Salwa undergoes transformation at the end of the novel that makes her question her social position. Before Jake, in a drugged stupor, hurls invectives at her and even attacks her physically, Salwa seems to look derogatively at the people of color (represented by the Guatemalan gardener whom she mistakes for a Mexican). The first time she sees him, while going to Jake's flat, she barely notices him. She actually manages to see a tiny logo of the company on the pickup truck, but she fails to see the person standing in front of her . The second time she sees him, however, she has mixed feelings towards him. On the one hand she contemplates the troubles he and his fellow gardener have undergone to cross the borders and live in the US, on the other, she thinks that he is involved in the robbery of her car. The last time she had visited Jake: "she wondered if he knew, or even if he had been responsible" (316). However , after Jake attacks her and sees her home trip a return to the 'pigsty' she came from, she realizes that she is a racialized other and begins to identify with the Mexican/Guatemalan gardeners. She decides to speak to them and '*give them a smile*' (320). Thrown out of the more privileged white castle, Salwa realizes that she is not welcome at the white people's party. Jake's insistence on reminding Salwa of her Arabness while hitting her indicate that Jake attempts to "define the boundaries of whiteness" (Cainker 52). Ironically Jake hits Salwa with the Japanese painting. It reminds us of the horrors of the Japanese internment during the World War II and creates a parallel with the current plight of Arabs in post 9/11 America. Salwa, bloodied and disfigured, is left at the end of the novel semi-conscious at the hospital, with a still unsuspecting Jassim sitting next to her. Although her actual return to Jordan is alluded to rather than included in the narrative, this promised final return takes on an ominous form, pointing to her shame and her failure in the Promised Land, which in turn comes to fully exhibit its less-than-promising dimensions. It is in this way then that at the novel's end, Salwa, "Palestinian by blood, Jordanian by residence, and American by citizenship" (70), retains no sense of true belonging to any country.

While hitting Salwa on her head, Jake shouted out at her: "Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch" (322). Through Jake's insistence on reminding Salwa of her Arabness, the novel draws attention to the nature of this crime and invites to think it as a hate crime. But the policeman, while investigating the matter, states that Jake was '"high [on drugs] as a kite"' at the time he attacked Salwa, thus simplifying the crime and contextualizing it as a purely drug related crime. Later on, the policeman tells Jassim that it "was a crime of passion" (327) hinting at a sexual affair. The attack is thus understood as undertaken in the heat of passion that mitigates the condemnation of the act. Here the police officer representing US government normalizes the hate crime carried out by the white US citizen. Thus the novel tries to demonstrate that both individual hate crimes and US government policies endorse the same racist ideology. The terrorist attacks were assaults not just on the property that the perpetrators of post-

September 11 violence claimed their own, but on their sense of honor. Thus their hate crimes are understood as born out of patriotic fervor. By this account, the perpetrators of hate crimes against Arabs, Muslims and South Asians were not guilty of malicious intent or depraved indifference, but of expressing a socially appropriate emotion – overwhelming anger in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks – in socially inappropriate ways. By circulating such discourses the Americans try to normalize such racism and is latter used as a back up for territorial infringement and occupation. As Salaita contentiously argues, rather than regard anti-Arab racism as a function of the geopolitical interaction between the Arab and the American worlds, "we are better served looking at that racism as being on continuum with America's roots in settler colonialism" (87).

Thus it is mainly as a result of racial profiling and sheer coincidences that Jassim and Salwa lose control of their lives, entering a downward spiral that sees them unemployed, alienated from each other and from their adopted country, and increasingly inclined to suspect that the decision to come to America compromised their happiness. As Jassim admits at the end of the novel:

> 'Salwa, I am sorry it has come to this. For what happened. I feel that I am responsible'….I've not provided for you what you needed, allowed you to be who you wanted. I should have recognized that you would have been better off staying in Jordan. I was selfish to have brought you here. I realized that today. Salwa, I am sorry. (326)

Similarly, Salwa is also freed from her attachment to America. She no longer believed in the Disney America, and no longer she remained the "Queen of Pajamas" (47) as she was dubbed because of her love for sexy and silky American lingerie. The culprit behind their lies and betrayals, according to her, is the alleged Promised Land, America. As she sees it, her errors of judgment would have never gone unchecked "back home" in Jordan: Here in America…No one tiptoed into dark rooms of other people's homes with their buckets of judgment and said what they really thought. There were no intrusive neighbors or blunt aunties to announce what they knew and say, *you'd better not, or else*" (181).

In this novel Laila Halaby has characterized America as *ghula* that tricks immigrants and their children into believing in the American dream, leading them in the process to abandon their values, culture, language, and religion, and to relinquish any attempt at a permanent return home. It entices dreamers to her promised land only to lull them into complacency with her riches and rob them of the hoped-for happy ending. In Arabic culture, a *ghula* is a female demonic entity that ensnares victims only to gorge on them when they are within her reach. Only the truly wise, such as *Nus Nsays* (which in Arabic means half of halving) in the folktale can escape this fate. At one occasion, Nus Nsays, using his cunning and resourcefulness, succeeds in escaping with his friend from the evil clutches of this wicked *ghula* that had held them hostage. The novels says: *"Every Palestinian has a bit of Nus Nsays within him or her"* (98). But Jassim and Salwa's pursuit of "good citizenship" inevitably leads to the silencing if not complete demise of Nus Nsays within them. Even though Halaby's pronouncement of America as a *ghula* can often sound didactic and overly generalized, it still effectively captures the effects of having one's US citizenship questioned and rendered suspect by virtue of place of birth or binational affiliations. At the same time, however, she also hints that healing can only come after a return home from the seductions and false allure of the promised land.

Thus the novel clearly focuses on anti-Muslim racism sparked by the attacks and by the official response to them; and in the process challenges homogenized depictions of Muslims Americans and forging revisionary spaces that stand against and redefine exclusionary conceptualizations of US citizenship. By articulating complex ethnic and diasporic identities, the text undercuts the us/them binary still pervading national discussions of 9/11. In addition to destabilizing the us/them binary defining limited forms of national belonging, the text also undercuts and problematizes the divisive rhetoric identifying the good Muslim from the bad Muslim. The author has successfully tried to improve and humanize the image of Muslim populations who have been subjected to a long term process of stereotyping in American literary and popular productions. This revised way of seeing, defining, and representing Muslim American identities provoke radical reconceptualizations of the hegemonic gaze that currently shapes the depiction of Muslim Americans as homogeneous Others. In espousing heterogenous and multilayered belongings, this text destabilizes exclusionary forms of US citizenship (extending to the racial, political, and religious) by incorporating new spaces and horizons that give rise to complex knowledges of minoritarian American identities while promulgating an important awareness of the power relations that continue to inform and shape the various segments of American society.

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